

Sermon: Formed for Love  
4 Epiphany, Year C  
Jeremiah 1: 4-10, 1 Cor. 13, Luke 4:21-30

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February 3, 2019

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”

We don't know exactly what Jeremiah was doing or how old he was when God interrupted him. We can surmise that in today's first reading, the prophet must not have been aware of God's plans for him until God spoke. And God surely did speak! Jeremiah said, “Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” Oh, Lord, here it comes! Imagine the mounting anxiety with which Jeremiah hears these words? Natural instincts being what they are, we can imagine Jeremiah wanting to run like mad. There seems to be no way out for Jeremiah. Almost as if God is saying, “You are so busted!”

Then Jeremiah says, “Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD responds, “Don't give me that ‘I am only a boy’ stuff!”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” And then God reassures Jeremiah, “Don't be afraid!... I'll be with you! I'll help you!”

The wonderful and terrifying thing about this passage is that it applies to all the faithful, not only to those who lived thousands of years ago. Sometimes Jeremiah is referred to as “everyman's prophet.” He complained, he wept, he made excuses just like the rest of us. Most of can relate to Jeremiah's predicament of being fearful, of feeling unworthy, of thinking we aren't equipped to do God's bidding.

Maybe you have your doubts that God speaks to you because you've not ever heard an audible voice. God speaks to us through a myriad of means - indeed it *can* be through an audible voice, but it can also be sometimes through an unrelenting thought or a persistent nudge, maybe through a prophetic dream, perhaps through someone else's voice, maybe through Scripture or prayer or communion. And often we, like Jeremiah, object to the call. While we might not say, “I am just a boy”, we have all kinds of other “I am just a \_\_\_” responses to resist the inevitable: “I am just old, or I am just inexperienced. I am just shy, I am just retired. I am just too terrified,” The one I'm tempted to add today for myself is, “Who am I to preach? I am just no Michael Curry!”  
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We all know our own list of excuses. Even sometimes *reasonable* excuses. The good news is that the biblical precedent is one of call, then struggle, then acceptance, so you are in good company as you listen for and accept the inevitable call of God. God's nature is to call us into mission with God. And as Bishop Curry reminded us many times last weekend at the Revival, our mission is to live into the Way of Love. And if it isn't about love it isn't about God! Right?

If we consider what God was actually calling Jeremiah to do, we might see that it is a very REASONABLE thing for him to be afraid - very afraid. Jeremiah is being called to

speak out to the nations a word of judgment and then to help them with words of hope. The Hebrew word used here for nations, *goyim*, referred in this 7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE context to the *enemies* of Israel, those who wanted Israel destroyed. This is no small task, speaking on behalf of God to nations who are at enmity with his own people as well as providing hope to a despairing people who have been in great turmoil. There is no doubt that a *reasonable* response for Jeremiah would have been to run away into the wilderness in hopes of ignoring God's call. And yet, Jeremiah responds to the God whose call is enveloped in love, and steps out in faith.

Sometimes, indeed most of the time, God's calls are scary and sometimes seem crazy! To reach beyond our self imposed limitations, to go into the painful and wounded places of others to bring healing and reconciliation. God's calls require us to leave something of our old selves behind, step out of our comfort zones, into the new creation God has seen in us since before we were formed in our mother's womb. If God has known us since before we were created, he certainly knows what we are capable of, which is "infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." (Eph.3:20)

God's call to mission will always take us in the direction of reconciling ourselves and others to God and to one another. Living in the way of love, through words, through action, through prayer will mean not being so self- focused but focused on others. Responding to God's call may mean, as it did for Jeremiah, speaking truth to power or giving hope to people in despair. It may mean righting a wrong, it may mean confronting prejudice, stopping a bully, it may mean writing your senators and congress to support legislation for *reasonable* gun laws in our country, or standing in solidarity with the poor. It also might mean comforting the sick, the bereaved or the dying. It may mean sharing your time, your talent, your treasure with the church in an expanded way, it may mean forgiving someone who has wronged you or even just sitting silently with God. Remember the most frequent command of the Bible – Fear not! To respond faithfully to God's call will take courage. Courage is not the absence of fear but the belief in something more important than the fear. God's call is rarely easy and yet God promises to be with us and to empower us to do the work he has called us to.

Before we were formed in our mother's womb God knew us. God knew you and I were created to love and be loved. And God interrupts us every day, sometimes several times a day, to help us begin to understand what that means. After each door we walk through in response to God's call, there will be another door God calls us through! God's call to transformation is relentless! As we learn more deeply what it means to love and be loved, we are changed. And this world needs that change in us, needs that love we exude. Like Jeremiah, may we be ready to listen for the voice that beckons us in this holy direction. Even with all our worries, and fears of unworthiness and inadequacies, may we welcome this call of love. May we be ready for the Divine Interruption! Amen.